

By MARTHA HIMES

Have you ever wondered what it would be like to join the Peace Corps? Travel to foreign countries, learn a new language, make friends around the world? Art Kirby has recently returned from three years working with the Peace Corps in Bolivia, and he can satisfy your curiosity on the subject.

In between his travels, Kirby, 25, now lives on Bay Farm Road, but he grew up in Buffalo, New York and Bowling Green, Kentucky. Throughout his youth, he summered with relatives on the South Shore. Eager to return to New England, he attended Bowdoin College in Brunswick, Maine, from which he was graduated in 1998.

He majored in both government studies and Spanish, and spent his junior year in Chile. While traveling through Chile, Bolivia and Peru, he met some Peace Corp volunteers who piqued his interest in the organization.

Kirby knew he didn't want a desk job after graduation. And he knew he wanted to travel. He soon realized that the Peace Corps fit both bills perfectly. He interviewed with the Corps his senior year in college. He was accepted, and began his service in September of 1998.

On his arrival in Bolivia, Kirby began three months' training to prepare him for his new job. This training included learning Quechua, the language spoken by the Quechua Indians of Bolivia, Peru and Ecuador, descendants of the Incan Empire.

He was assigned to Pocona, a town with approximately 100 residents. Pocona is fairly poor; Kirby estimated the town's average per capita income as about \$150 a year. Much of Pocona's trade is

based on barter of the region's primary crops: corn, wheat and potatoes. However, despite being 140 miles from the nearest city, the town did not feel remote, because Pocona has electricity.

"I could listen to music, stay up later, read, not have to burn candles. As far as remoteness, there are some volunteers in Bolivia who are twelve hours

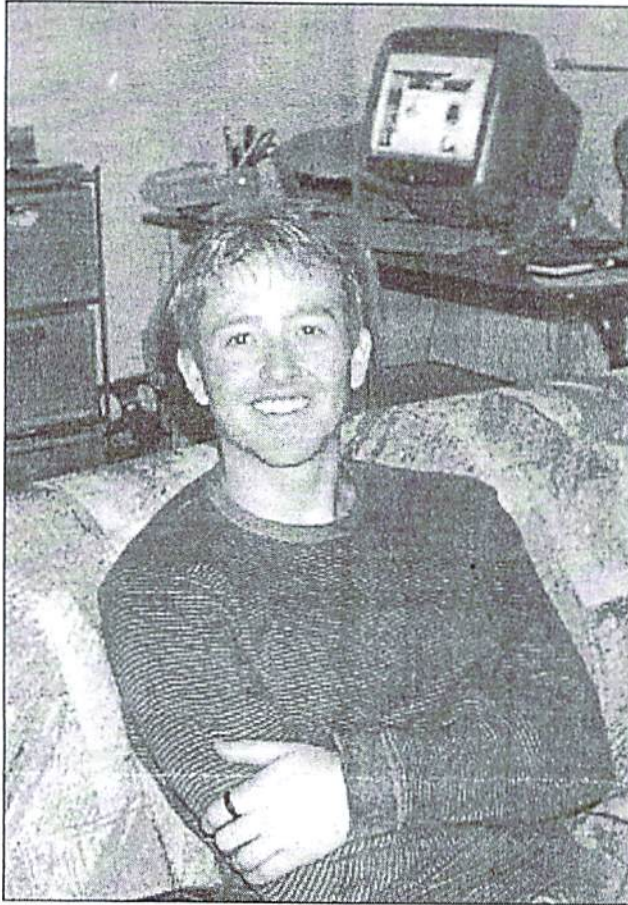
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from the closest regional city and have no electricity," Kirby explained.

His project was to install small water systems in communities outside Pocona. These communities, generally clusters of about 10 homes, obtained water by walking a few miles to the spring. Kirby's assignment was to create a gravity-fed water system that would distribute water to a common spigot centrally located between the homes.

The communities paid for the systems, in cash, materials and sweat equity. The Peace Corps helped the communities locate funding, helped build the systems, and trained the townspeople in their use and maintenance.

"The community members are owners of their own system. They did all the labor; they provided all the materials, like sand and gravel for the construction of tanks. And they pay a monthly water tariff," Kirby said.



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Because the townspeople are so involved, both financially and personally, the hope is that they will be educated enough and motivated enough to maintain the system after the Peace Corps is gone. To Kirby, educating the townspeople was almost as critical a job as laying the water lines.

"Walking to these communities, I'd walk by a lot of latrines that agencies came in and dug, but they never did an education component. So some people didn't even know what they were for, and you would see wood or potatoes being stored in them, because they provided shelter from rain," Kirby said. "Making a project sustainable is the most difficult."

Another challenge for Kirby was convincing the villagers to

boil water before they use it. Despite a filter system, the water cannot be classified as potable, due to natural pollutants, such as bacteria. "They don't boil the water, because they don't have the resources to put on a few extra logs of wood to boil a pot of water. They'll just drink it. There's a lot of gastrointestinal diseases there, and a really high infant mortality rate, which I'm sure has a lot to do with the quality of the water they're drinking," Kirby said.

Kirby was the only Peace Corps volunteer living in Pocona. As a result, he befriended a number of the townspeople, with whom he attempts to keep in touch. "The people are the nicest people you'll ever want to meet, very warm and caring, incredibly friendly," Kirby said. Correspondence is

difficult, because Pocona has no mail service and a high rate of illiteracy. However, there is a Peace Corps volunteer living there currently, and Kirby keeps up with his friends through her.

Kirby feels that compared to the aid and education he gave the Bolivians, he received more in return. Besides learning about himself, his needs and his ability to live simply, he learned flexibility in the face of adversity.

"I've never failed so often as I did when I was in Bolivia. My patience has never been tested so much as when I was down there.... I learned how to accept failure. Not to accept it with a resigned attitude, like 'I've failed,' but to take from the failure all the possible positives and go about it another way, and be persistent at it... and be open to every possible imaginary outcome.... I feel now I can adapt to anything that's thrown my way, no question," Kirby said.

Kirby enjoyed his Peace Corps experience so much that when his two-year stint in Pocona ended, he extended his stay by signing on for a third year as a volunteer coordinator in the city of Santa Cruz.

And he loved Bolivia so much that he plans to return in September, first to Santa Cruz and then to Pocona, to visit his friends. He'd like to sign on with another community development agency for a year or so, in Bolivia or elsewhere in Latin America. After that, he is thinking of graduate study in either International Development or Community Planning.

And in the meantime, he can point to a beautiful water system in Pocona, Bolivia, that he helped build.